

## **Muhammad Ali and the Power of Pride**

By Nick Gier (ngier006@gmail.com)

*Muhammad Ali taught us all that, whatever color you are,  
whatever religion you are, you can be proud of who you are.*

—Bill Clinton

Most of the nation's founders were intellectuals who drew moral and political lessons from ancient philosophy. With regard to pride, they would have been aware that Aristotle ranked it as a virtue second only to wisdom. They would also have known that in the Christian tradition pride was one of the seven deadly sins.

Our founders seemed unaware of this fundamental tension in the hybrid culture that they developed from pagan and Christian roots. Most Americans today are not aware of this conflict either. In Sunday School we are taught that boasting is a sin, but the previous Friday or Saturday we were out rooting for our athletic teams with unabashed pride. It is also still common to see the 9/11 bumper sticker "The Power of Pride."

One might ask: "What sort of pride, however, is it when your team tends to lose every game"? Surely the answer must be that the goal of sports is not to win but to do your best. If your team has performed well even in defeat, then you can take pride in your team. The ethics of athletic competition is lost when this essential point is ignored.

### **Pride: Individual and Collective**

It is clear that pride can be collective as well as individual. We take pride in the accomplishments of our children because we know that we have contributed to their success. The same is true for national pride. Any number of U.S. achievements could be named, but I think that the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II was one of our greatest efforts. American exceptionalism—"we are the greatest nation in the world"—is to me false pride.

When President George W. Bush boasted that the U.S. had the best health system in the world, he either did not have his facts straight (certainly a possibility) or he was deliberately inflating the nation's ego. What sort of national pride can we have after the International Committee of the Red Cross has determined that the Bush administration violated the Geneva Conventions on torture? There is definitely nothing to be proud of in these shameful cases.

## **Pride is Being True to One's Self**

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that pride is knowing what we have accomplished and freely acknowledging that we have done it. Aristotle did not respect people who hid their lights under a bushel. Aristotle believes that humility is a vice because the accomplished person (and all of us have achieved something) is not being true to herself or himself.

Genuine pride is a mean between the excess of boasting when nothing has been attained and the deficit of failing to acknowledge what has been achieved. Perhaps the key is to learn how to talk about our accomplishments without bragging about them. This of course is not an easy line to draw.

## **The Frustrations of False Humility**

False humility is just as bad as unjustified pride. Garrison Keillor was a recent guest on the NPR program *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*. The host Peter Sagal is witty and unflappable, but he was reduced to babbling after Keillor resolutely refused to acknowledge any of Sagal's compliments. I know several people who are unable to take a compliment, and I have also experienced awkward conversations because of this. Are we Americans so conflicted about humility and pride that some of us simply don't know what to say when are faced with owning up to what we've done well? The best response to compliments I've heard is "you are very kind to say that," although that might be too humble for Muhammad Ali.

## **"It Ain't Bragging If You Can Do It"**

National Public Radio's inspiring series *This I Believe* ended with an essay by Ali, and he sounded just like the brash young boxer we knew in the 1960s. Ali said that he was still the greatest and that everyone could succeed just as he did. Ali was unwittingly following Aristotle when he once proclaimed "It ain't bragging if you can do it."

Some years go NPR's Dian Rehm interviewed with Tori McClure, who rowed across the Atlantic only after being inspired by Ali to do it. After her first failed attempt, she started working for the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky. Ali told her that she should not live with the failure of her first attempt. She realized that Ali was right and went out and achieved her goal. During her interview, there was no boasting as McClure laid out the harrowing details of her feat as if it were just a grueling hike. She succeeded in the face of incredible odds but didn't crow about it. As a white privileged female perhaps she did not need to.

Normally we would not tolerate people who say that they are the greatest even though they may have accomplished much. Do we give Ali a pass because he was a unique personality, or because he was one of the greatest boxers of all time, or because of his great humanitarian accomplishments while crippled with Parkinson's disease?

As a young black man, facing brutal discrimination at every turn, Ali felt that he had no choice but to lash out and refuse to be yet another "white man's Negro." Before Ali, black athletes were expected to be kind, civil, and grateful, but not Ali. Here is one of his most provocative statements: "I am America. I am the part you won't recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky, my name not yours. My religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me." Not only did we get used to him, but he has now become a national hero.

### **The Press Rebuked Him, but Black Athletes Supported Him**

Newspapers persisted in referring to him by his "slave name" Cassius Clay, and *Time* magazine called him "Gaseous Cassius." Even Howard University, America's finest black school, blocked him from speaking in a campus hall. While Floyd Patterson and Jackie Robinson criticized him refusing to enlist, eleven black athletes (led by Jim Brown) and Cleveland mayor Carl Stokes held a news conference on June 4, 1967 to praise his integrity and courage.

One of those present was Walter Beach, outstanding cornerback for the Cleveland Browns. He was temporarily suspended from the team because he organized a protest about travel accommodations. White players stayed in luxury hotels, but black players were put up by local black families. Jim Brown intervened and Beach was back on the team. Speaking about the news conference, the now 81-year-old Beach said: "It was one of the most significant moments in my life. Ali was one of the most principled and moral human beings on the planet at the time, with the sensitivity and courage to stand."

In April, 1967, Ali refused to be drafted and he was arrested. He posted bail and waited nearly three years until the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, agreed with his claim that he was a Muslim minister. During this time, he was not allowed to box and he lost these prime years of competition.

### **"I Ain't Got No Quarrel with them Viet Cong"**

With regard to the Vietnam War, he was defiant: "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong. Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?"

He of course had more to say: “My conscience won’t let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me, they didn’t rob me of my nationality, rape or kill my mother and father. How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail.”

In addition to Bayard Rustin, the gay man who organized the March on Washington and who persuaded Martin Luther King to come out against the Vietnam War, Ali also played a pivotal role. Including Asians in his statement, King declared: “Like Muhammad Ali puts it, we are all — black and brown and poor — victims of the same system of oppression.”

### **Black Soldiers in Vietnam Doing “Daps”**

Black soldiers in Vietnam were galvanized by Ali’s stand against the war. Yusef Komunyakka, a war correspondent for *The Southern Cross*, writes: “One night in Chu Lai, I heard a black Marine say to a white one, “Look, I don’t want to hear ‘gook’ or ‘dink’ ’cause I don’t know what you’ll call me tomorrow.”

Some black GIs wore “Black Unity” wrist bands, and many of them gave each other fist bumps they called “daps.” As Komunyakka explains: “Behind the dap between young black soldiers in Vietnam was a scream. It was a greeting of kindred souls. At times, the dap seemed choreographed to Ali’s words, a dance of defiance on the edge of battle.”

### **Ali’s Spiritual Journey: From Malcom X to the Sufis**

Ali converted to Islam and took a new name that means “beloved of Allah.” His spiritual journey took him from the radical black nationalism of Malcom X, then to orthodox Sunni Islam, and finally to the peace-loving Sufis. His favorite author was the Indian Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan, who founded the Sufi Order of the West and who believed in the unity of all religions.

Ali of course took umbrage at Donald Trump’s call for banning Muslims from entering the U. S.: “I am a Muslim, and there is nothing Islamic about killing innocent people in Paris, San Bernardino, or anywhere else in the world. True Muslims know the ruthless violence of so-called Islamic Jihadists goes against the very tenets of our religion.”

Back in early December President Obama mentioned in passing “sporting heroes” who were Muslims. Donald Trump tweeted: “What sport is he talking about, and who?”

In addition to Ali, there are of course boxers Mike Tyson and Bernard Hopkins. Three of the top ten scorers in NBA history are Muslims: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Shaquille O'Neal, and Hakeem Olajuwon. Denver Bronco star Aqib Talib is a Muslim, and so is Muhammad Wilkerson of the New York Jets. Once again Trump has put his small foot in his big mouth.

### **UN Messenger of Peace**

The Muslim world honored Ali and at his funeral the King of Muslim Jordan and Muslim Turkey were present. The United Nations made him "A Messenger of Peace." In 1979, at the beginning of the Iranian hostage crisis, Ali offered himself as a replacement for Americans held in Tehran. (The Iranians refused.) In 1985 he was successful bringing back four Americans held in Beirut, Lebanon.

In 1990, six weeks before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Ali traveled to Baghdad and secured the release of 15 American hostages. Hostage Harry Brill-Edwards said: "I've always known that Muhammad Ali was a super sportsman; but during those hours that we were together, inside that enormous body I saw an angel."

### **The Butterfly's Great Soul**

In his autobiography *The Soul of a Butterfly*, Ali wrote: "During my boxing career, you did not see the real Muhammad Ali. After I retired from boxing my true work began. I have embarked on a journey of love." Special recipients of that love were children. He would pick up and kiss just about any child in reach, and he promised all the little girls that he met that he would come back and marry them.

Tim Shanahan was Ali's friend for 40 years, and they would always do a morning run together. There was one topic that Ali always wanted to talk about and that was the world's starving children. According to Shanahan, Ali would usually say: "I believe in miracles. And I believe that one day, all the children in the world will be fed."

One could argue that because of his fame and wide-spread appeal Ali empowered more people than either Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela. His promoter Bob Arum states: "He's the most transforming figure of my time certainly. He did more to change race relations and the views of people than even Martin Luther King."

In his autobiography Ali writes: "I guess I'd settle for being remembered only as a great boxer who became a leader and a champion of his people," and with a twinkle in his eye and a glimmer of true humility, he adds: "And I wouldn't even mind if folks forgot how pretty I was."

The Greek word *megalopsychia*, which we translate as “pride,” literally means “having a great soul.” Inspired by Aristotle, I like to define ethics as the art of making the soul great. Just as a jeweler carves a rough stone, each of us is tasked with making ourselves a “gem of a person.” Muhammad Ali was definitely a great soul, but not the greatest. May this fierce yet gentle soul rest in peace and may he continue to be an inspiration to us all.

Nick Gier of Moscow taught philosophy and religion at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read all of his columns on civil rights at <http://webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/civilrights.htm>.